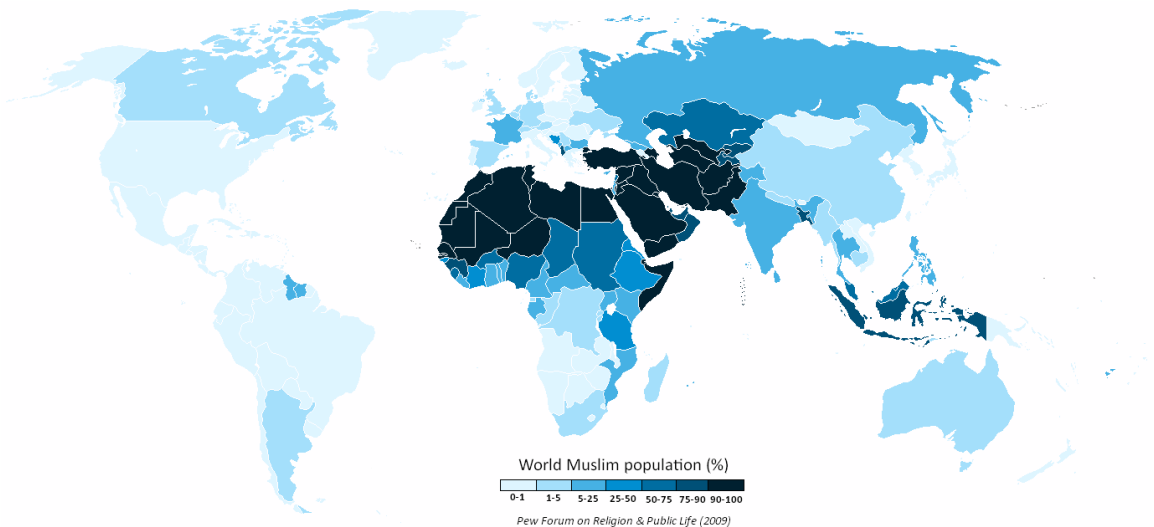


**Christianity & World Religions:
Islam
Genesis 21:8-13
May 9, 2010**

When we hear the word Muslim or Islam what is our reaction? Is it a neutral response, or do those words produce negative emotions? My guess is that we have attached opinions and attitudes to those words. For those words represent a people, a people who seem to be odds against America and Christianity.

I believe this bias that many Americans have is the result of misinformation and misrepresentation. We know there are extreme Islamic groups that have both spoken out against the west as well as acted out this anger by violent means. September 11th, 2001 is the turning point in America's view of Islam.

This morning we will be spending some time looking at Islam. Of the four major religions of the world, this one is the most important for Christians to learn about. As I said when I began this sermon series, of the approximately six billion people in the world, 1.3 billion, or about 1/5 are Muslims. Ken Dowell found an interesting map on the internet. As we look at the map we can see where people of the Muslim faith live.



As you can see, there are not many on the United States. The number I read was ½ of 1 percent. Since Dearborn has one of the largest Arab populations outside the Middle East, we are exposed to more Muslims than people in other parts of the country. Not all Arab folks are Muslims. My sister-in-law works at the Arab American Museum in Dearborn. Many on the staff, though of Arab heritage, are not Muslims. Even with those that are Christian or of other faiths, the vast majority of Arab Americans are Muslim.

As we explore Islam this morning we will learn about Mohammed, the founder of Islam. We will also look at some of the basic beliefs of Islam and lift up two points of doctrine about which Muslims and Christians disagree.

Islam is the youngest of the five major religions of the world. The beginning of Islam is traced back to about 610 AD and a man named Mohammed. Mohammed lived from AD 570 to AD 632. Born in Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia, Mohammed had a tragic childhood. His father died just before he was born. His mother died when he was six. Mohammed went to live with his grandfather, but he died shortly after that. Mohammed was then raised by his uncle. His family was respected but they were poor. There was no education for Mohammed, who never learned how to read or write.

Growing up in Mecca, Mohammed was exposed to many religions. Besides being a center for Commerce, Mecca was also the center for pagan worship. In the city there was a shrine called the *Ka'bah*. Arabian people would come and worship hundreds of gods at the Ka'bah. Besides those religious practices, Judaism and Christianity also had followers in Mecca.

Mohammed became familiar with the beliefs of Jews and Christians. A man of deep spirituality he believed in the one God of the Christian and Jews, but he did not join either of the faiths.

To help meditate, Mohammed would often go to a cave to pray. One day while praying at the cave, he had a dream. In that dream he saw a spiritual being he later knew as Gabriel the angel. The angle showed him a parchment and told Mohammed to write those words down. Mohammed told Gabriel he could not write. The angle then pressed the parchment up to Mohammed chest so that the words on the parchment became imprinted upon Mohammed's heart.

Mohammed shared those words with his wife and friends. Over the course of the next 23 years he would have visions like this over and over again. Mohammed believed Gabriel was communicating God's word to him. After he was given the word, he would share it to those that would listen. He soon developed a small following.

After the tragic loss of his wife, a city about 200 miles to the north contacted Mohammed. They had heard about his leadership and offered him the opportunity to come and be one of their rulers. So in 622 Mohammed and his small band of followers moved to Medina.

In Medina Mohammed continued to have visions. Instead of spirituality, the dreams focused on leadership and military strategy. Like before, he would share these visions with his followers. Over the years, these followers got into the habit of writing down those dreams.

At one point the army of Mecca decided to attack Medina. Mohammed and his army were victorious. After the victory, Mohammed moved his base of operation to Mecca. Upon his return to Mecca, one of Mohammed's first acts was to destroy all the idols at the *Ka'bah*. Mohammed then consecrated the ancient shrine to the worship of Allah.

Three years later, in 632, he died at the age of 62. Following Mohammed's death, his followers collected all the sayings that had been written down after his dreams. All these sayings were put down into a book that we know today as the Quran.

That's the story of Mohammed; now let's look at the beliefs of Islam. The word Islam has at its root the word *slm*. From this same root we get the Hebrew word Shalom, which means peace. "Slm" means peace, but it also means submission or surrender. That is what "Islam" means. Islam is the religion of submission or surrender to Allah. A Muslim is "one who is submitted to Allah".

The name Allah is the Arabic word for God. Christians and Muslims intend to serve the same God. If you were to go to a Christian church service where they spoke in Arabic, you would hear those Christians calling God Allah.

Both Christians and Muslims trace their heritage back to Abraham. In our scripture reading we heard about Hagar and her son Ishmael. In the days of Abraham it was important to have an heir. If a wife could not produce a boy, it was custom to have children with a slave. When it looked like Sarah couldn't have any children, Abraham had a son with Hagar.

Our portion of scripture tells what happened when Sarah did have a son. To this day the people of the Islamic faith claim Ishmael to be the founder of their nation.

To understand Islam it is important to know about the Quran. As I said before, the Quran is the collection of visions the angel Gabriel gave to Mohammed. The word Quran means "recitations". Everything that Muslims believe springs from this book.

The Quran is to Islam what Jesus is to Christianity: It is thought to be God's definitive and final revelation. If you read the Quran, you will find parts that sound very similar to the bible. Though there are versions of the Quran available in English, most Muslims believe the Quran can only be read in Arabic. Since this was the language God gave the revelation, it takes away from the revelation if you translate it into another language.

If you were to read the Quran, you would be able to learn about the 5 pillars of faith. The five pillars are not only teachings but also obligations. In fact, they are the cornerstone of being a Muslim. To help explain the 5 pillars I want you to watch Ahmed El-Sherif from Kansas.

1. There is only one God and Allah is God's name.
2. Prayer five times a day
3. Fasting once a year during the month of Ramadan
4. Charity, Muslims must pay their "purity of Wealth" to the poor 2.5%
5. Pilgrimage. Muslims take a *Hajj* to Mecca once in a lifetime.

Now that we know something about Islam, let us look at a couple differences between Christianity and Islam.

One has to do with the authority of the Quran. Muslims believe the Quran is the actual word of God. As I said before, that is why it is wrong to translate it into another language.

We view our Bible as sacred, but we believe the Bible was written by man. Though inspired or directed by God, it was men that actually put the words down. Given the human component to the composition, we acknowledge certain biases in the texts.

As a Christian we do not hold this book to be the final revelation of God. Jesus Christ is! On this point Muslims and Christians can never agree. Muslims do acknowledge Jesus, but they see him as a great teacher, not the incarnation of God. It is the Quran that is the final word of God.

Though there are differences between our two faiths, it does not mean we should mistrust one another. Yes there are extremists that get a lot of attention in their hatred for the west, i.e. Christian Americans. I know they do not speak for the majority of Muslims. Though warfare is an historic part of the Muslim tradition and is written about in the Quran, it is not the major focus of Islam.

Our Muslims cousins worship the same God we worship. Though we don't agree on important points, we still try to honor God through our lives. Muslims are good people; they are hard working and have families. If we spent time with a Muslim, we would probably get along.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says, "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us." Our calling is to be ambassadors to all people, but especially to our Muslims cousins. What kind of ambassador will we be?